



Local, state officials huddle over park clean-up

Residents promised financial data

By Roger Matile

Problems at the Oswegoland Park District's Saa-Wee-Kee Park have not been solved, but park district officials say they are working on solutions.

Park district director Bert Gray told park board members last Thursday that he and other district staffers met with representatives of the Illinois Attorney General's office and the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency (IEPA) on Aug. 14 to discuss the ongoing cleanup of the park property.

Saa-Wee-Kee is a heavily wooded 160 acre parcel located just south of Oswego along the banks of the Fox River. A former gravel mine, the land was once owned by the state of Illinois, and was the site of a municipal dump operated by the village of Oswego and the city of Yorkville from the 1940s to the 1960s. It was deeded to the Oswegoland Park District in 1963 for development as a natural areas park.

However, residents living along Sundown Lane and Minkler Road in the area of the park began complaining two years ago that the park was contaminated with hazardous waste and was too dangerous for the public to use due to rubbish scattered on the ground throughout the property.

Subsequently, the IEPA, the U.S. EPA, the Illinois Department of Public Health, and other regulatory agencies discovered that some steel drums buried on park property contained dried paint with levels of lead now considered hazardous under federal and state guidelines.

A total of 56 of the drums were removed by the park district last winter.

Gray told park board members that he and other park staffers met with Kevin Hines of the Illinois Attorney General's office and Mark Retslaf of the IEPA to

survey the park district-owned portion of the old dump site. Gray said the park district is now working to draw up a compliance plan on areas of concern that must be approved by the attorney general as well as by the IEPA.

Gray said the district has 30 days from Aug. 14 to draw up the plan and send it to the attorney general's office.

"I am feeling positive that some of the smaller issues—if I can call them that—are solvable," Gray said. "We are hopeful we can start checking some of these items off."

Following the first meeting, Gray said, district employees met with another pair of IEPA representatives, one from Springfield and one from the IEPA's Maywood office.

Gray said that Hines told the IEPA representatives that all communications and orders to the park district concerning Saa-Wee-Kee have to go through the attorney general's office.

"You have to understand that there was no coordination and that the IEPA people from Springfield did not know the attorney general's people would be out there," Gray reported. "The attorney general's office did not have any information on why the people were coming up from Springfield. [Hines] was very clear that all actions, permissions for actions, things that need to be done are going through him."

Gray said the balance of the afternoon was spent showing the Springfield IEPA group around the site, which they had not seen before. He said they took samples of the semi-liquid leachate seeping from the ground in the dump area in order to run chemical tests. The leachate has been tested two times before without finding much besides levels of metals such as iron and trace amounts of silver, but the IEPA reps promised the new tests would be more comprehensive.

Gray said that as of Thursday, the district had not heard about any test results or any further information from the two inspectors.

Gray noted that park district crews had picked up debris from the surface of the

park grounds, which were taken to the dumpster at Prairie Point Center for disposal. The IEPA, he said, objected and directed the district to only deposit the items in a dumpster on the park site. However, Gray said, the four day surface clean-up had been completed by the time the agency complained.

Gray said all the warning signs proposed to be installed at the park designed to keep visitors out of areas with surface or hazardous materials hazards have been installed, except one sign that will be erected when the clean-up of several old junk vehicle chassis on the site is completed. The material is being removed by a local metal scavenger. Gray said the sign would have stood a good chance of being damaged if it had been installed prior to the material being removed.

The signs warn: "Caution. Hazards may exist off marked trails. Please stay on marked trails." On the trails, other signs warn: "Stay on trails."

Gray said the park district liability insurance carrier feels the signs are adequate protection for park visitors, and has told the district fencing portions of the 12 acre site which is of concern to the IEPA, and other agencies is not necessary.

Gray said that quotes on fencing costs and recommendations of the best kind of fencing for the task of keeping visitors out of areas that may contain hazards are now being sought from fencing companies.

"Any fencing options will be included in our comprehensive plan that will be filed with the Illinois Attorney General's office," Gray said.

He noted the district is prohibited from doing anything at the site—including erecting warning fences or signs—without the attorney general's approval.

Residents seek more information

In other related business, Ramona Capalby, a resident living near Saa-Wee-Kee Park submitted three Illinois Freedom of Information Act requests for park district documents.

Gray said the requests were for an accounting of all money spent on the park clean-up so far, a copy of a report for the district's law firm by Earth Tech, Inc., another report being compiled by the district's law firm by Greichen Mont public relations specialist in environmental matters.

Gray said Friday he was working to put together the financial information Capalby requested. He noted another neighbor, Neil Hambly, had already requested the information. He suggested it would have the report completed in a couple of weeks.

The other two reports, Gray said, were commissioned for the district's law firm and were not in the park district's possession.

"I do not have them, so I cannot release them," he said.

At Thursday's meeting, Capalby's band, Wayne, told Gray he had a number of documents on Saa-Wee-Kee and property's history he had obtained from the state of Illinois through Freedom of Information Act requests. Capalby said the documents proved the park district refused offers of a free clean-up of the dump site in the early 1980s.

Gray requested copies of Capalby's documents, and offered to allow Capalby immediate use of the park district's copy to duplicate the documents. Capalby refused to allow the documents to be copied or to copy them himself.

State owns section of old dump site: memo

It looks like the Oswegoland Park District isn't the only governmental agency having problems managing property at the Saa-Wee-Kee Park area.

Saa-Wee-Kee Park neighbor Neil Hambly, who attended last Thursday's Oswegoland Park District board meeting, gave park district director Bert Gray a copy of a memo written by Dan Carr of the Illinois Department of Conservation (IDOC) noting that the state owns 16 acres of property adjoining Saa-Wee-Kee, and that the old dump site is on state-owned land.

The memo notes that there are more metal drums with unknown contents buried on state land and that the debris, including syringes, can be seen on the surface on the IDOC property with glass, garbage, and ground litter.

Carr recommended the IDOC investigate the property to find out exactly what is there.

"Our failure to do so will certainly open us into a bad position, and lead to sizable publicity as well," Carr wrote the memo, adding, "This could be a serious problem, and if we take the appropriate action on our property or determine what is there, it would certainly be to our advantage."

The 16 acre IDOC site has never been open to the public, according to Carr, who added, "It's good that since IDOC's area contains some of the hazardous materials as Saa-Wee-Kee, the department of conservation is willing to cooperate with the same agencies we've been dealing with over the last year or so."

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Exercise

From: Ramona Capalby